Defending a Home for Trans Fencers

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Acknowledgments

This thesis has been a bear to write– I began my first draft mere hours after completing my prévôt in 2024. Over a year later, the paper has drastically changed, seen a preliminary publication in the Swordmaster, and changed topics several times in response to the volatile changes in American politics and culture. Thank you to my father, Dr. Christopher Gregory, for being a preliminary reader and providing insightful feedback, as well as other readers on my favorite fencing Discord channel. Thank you to the following folks at the USFCA for assisting the creation of this paper: Vinnie Bradford for always responding to my emails, David Sierra, Carolyn Gresham-Fiegel, Maureen Griffin and John Krauss.

My path in fencing began at a small fencing club run out of a YMCA in the mill city of Woonsocket, Rhode Island. I will forever be grateful to the coaches at Blackstone Valley Fencing Academy for teaching me the only sport right for me, and my father for driving me across the Northeast to compete relentlessly not because I was good, but because I found happiness doing it. I've had a long list of coaches including and not limited to Michael Olson, Eric Soyka, and Zeno Doeleman, without whom I would not be the fencer or coach I am today.

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I'm grateful for the trans women and non-binary people in fencing I've been able to talk with as I undergo my own transition.

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Abstract

Transgender athletes are being subject to criticism for existing in athletics. USA Fencing adopted a transgender and nonbinary policy in 2022. This policy has been called into question

by right-wing critics sympathetic to the Trump Administration's rhetoric and subsequent executive orders restricting and impinging upon the presence of transgender individuals in daily life. Moreover, the election of Kirsty Coventry to the IOC presidency further endangers USAF's policy. Scientific literature suggests more research on transgender athletes is needed, especially in fencing. In light of a likely imminent ban on transgender women competing in women's categories, I examine several models that USA Fencing has proposed for transgender competitors. I argue that, if a ban is enforced by the IOC and consequently USA Fencing, the creation of a mixed category for transgender fencers is the best path forward. I also argue that fencing coaches are obliged to protect queer athletes as part of our obligations to grow the sport of fencing. This obligation includes supporting trans athletes' rights to compete as themselves and be visibly accepted, respected and cared for in the fencing space.

Introduction

In 2010, the NCAA consulted top experts in medicine to draft a policy addressing how transgender student-athletes may safely and fairly participate in college athletics. In short, a transgender man who has begun hormone therapy must compete on a men's team, and a transgender woman having completed one year of testosterone suppression treatment may compete on a women's team (NCAA transgender policy background, resources). At its annual summit in Colorado Springs in 2022, USA Fencing decided to follow suit, implementing its own policy. Consulting with members of the DEIB (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging) committee, legal counsel and medical experts, USAF crafted a policy following similar guidelines to the NCAA's and sharing consistency with the International Olympic Committee's decision to allow individual sports and their National Governing Bodies to create their own policies. As USA Fencing Director of Communications Bryan Wendell writes in his Vet Worlds Final Recap, "This move is an important first step toward expanding access to the sport of fencing and creating inclusive and safe spaces that promote equality and fairness for all." USA Fencing's CEO Phil

Andrews elaborated at the time of the 2022 trans and non-binary policy implementation: “It is critical that we protect the rights of nonbinary and transgender athletes in fencing. Even as we plan to conduct more scientific research into the physiological effects of gender transition as they pertain specifically to the sport of fencing, we remain unanimously and steadfastly supportive of transgender athletes having their place in fencing. To be clear, even as this issue evolves, our support of transgender athletes will not waver.”

I begin this thesis with two statements that might immediately impact how the reader approaches all of the content to follow: 1. Transgender women are women, and 2. Biological sex and gender are not the same. It’s nothing new that there has been an increase in discourse and hate speech surrounding transgender people participating in sport. The conversation has been ignited in the United States particularly by the career of American collegiate swimmer Lia Thomas and elsewhere by New Zealand Olympian Laurel Hubbard. These names may be familiar because of the belief that transgender women have inherent physical advantages over cisgender women in sports, and are therefore likely to win more often. There is an often underlying, occasionally explicit belief that trans women are transitioning and competing to gain an advantage over cisgender women. Transphobic sports voices often try to create a narrative that a mediocre men’s athlete will suddenly excel in women’s sports.

Transgender athletes have increasingly been subject to vitriol in the public eye, including from politicians making a culture war the focal point of election campaigns in 2024 and beyond. Transphobia mobilizes traditional gender norms to the effect that even cisgender women suffer from it. For example, Donald Trump criticized Olympic boxer Imane Khelif as a “male boxer who stole a woman’s gold medal” despite Khelif being cisgender. Trump promised voters a slew of anti-transgender action as part of his 2024 bid, and within the first two months of his second presidency, he has made good on these promises, signing multiple executive orders targeting transgender individuals in the military and in sports, and taking aim at children’s gender-affirming care.

This increased transphobic vitriol has galvanized voices in the American fencing community. In the December 2024 USAF Board meeting, several Board members spoke in favor of adopting a task force to re-examine the association's transgender and non-binary policy despite the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Office, Athlete Council and medical professionals all suggesting that the policy remain the same. In short, the position of the Athlete Council, Chairman of the Board and CEO of USA Fencing has been that, unless science suggests otherwise or the FIE, federal government or USOPC requires a trans ban, transgender athletes will remain included. The March 20, 2025, International Olympic Committee election of Kirsty Coventry, who has supported a blanket ban of all transgender women from competing in Olympic sports, puts this position in peril.

In this thesis, I examine criticism and defense of USA Fencing's Transgender and Non-binary policy. I then examine a series of studies that suggests there is either insufficient data on transgender athletes or that testosterone suppression indeed levels the playing field. However, the IOC is nonetheless poised to ban transgender women from competing in women's sports. In the face of a likely ban, we must determine the place of transgender people in American fencing regardless of Presidential or IOC politics. Then, if transgender women are banned from the women's category wholesale, we must keep competition as inclusive as we can. I examine several competitive models proposed at the December 2024 Board Meeting of USA Fencing; these include allowing transgender women to compete in women's events under stricter blood testing standards, making the men's category a men's/mixed category, and creating a third mixed category outright. I argue that creating a third mixed category at the regional[1] and national level– if a transgender ban is enacted by the IOC– is the best solution to comply with the law while including transgender athletes in American fencing. A third mixed category will include trans fencers and afford them the closest-to-equal competitive opportunities as their cisgender counterparts as is possible.

[1] Mixed events already exist at the local levels and are common in smaller divisions.

Politics surrounding Transgender Fencers Today

There have been transgender women competing in American fencing facing ridicule from the same transphobic sources. Several women, including junior, senior and veteran fencers in foil, saber and epee alike, have been publicly criticized, deadnamed or otherwise been subject to transphobia for participating in the sport that we all love. I believe this is wrong. In attempts to involve fencing in a larger discourse that attacks minorities in lieu of advancing a constructive political agenda, The Daily Mail, MSN, and Fox News have attacked, deadnamed, or otherwise complained about these athletes. For example, The Daily Mail covered Anikka Suchoski's podium performance at a *regional* tournament, calling her "towering" and emphasizing the short span of her fencing career prior to medaling ("Outrage as towering transgender fencer hammers experienced female rivals at championship just SIX MONTHS after taking up the sport"). The article compares Suchoski to legendary vet fencer Liz Kocab, who has received a volume of anti-trans coverage over the length of her fencing career. The Daily Mail, MSN and ABC News all quote college swimmer Riley Gaines' attack on Liz:

> Liz Kocab (male) wins his [sic] 8th Fencing World Championship title… in the women's category. Winning a title as a male in the women's category doesn't make you a champion. It makes you an entitled cheat ("Transgender female takes gold in women's fencing championships, sparking outrage").

Fox News similarly covered junior women's foil fencer Red Sullivan's gold medal at a divisional qualifier in order to bolster claims made by the Fair Fencing Organization in one of their open letters to USA Fencing's Board (Fox News). These articles are mean-spirited and are intellectually dishonest in overplaying the significance of a regional tournament as a championship and a divisional qualifier as a major victory.

There is positive coverage of Kocab's success, such as PinkNews' 2023 article by Ali Condon. Condon points out that Kocab's 2023 World Championship win was over a 14-time champion, complicating claims that Liz stands out above all others. Condon also writes "USA Fencing CEO Phil Andrews has made it abundantly clear that the governing body for fencing

had no intention of bending to the will of bigots." She quotes Andrews, who explains that "our support of transgender athletes will not waver." In a similar clarification of the attacks levied at our trans women in fencing, the United States earned more medals at the 2023 Veteran World Championship than every other country combined (Vet Worlds Final Recap). We extended this lead in 2024, and transgender participation does not impact this feat– these records would still hold without Liz Kocab's medals. Similarly, the 2024 Paris Olympic roster was composed entirely of cisgender-identifying athletes, despite transgender athletes having competed in qualifying events throughout the Olympic Cycle. To this point, the narrative of a trend of transgender women drastically outperforming cisgender women has yet to materialize in fencing.

USA Fencing's Transgender and Nonbinary Athlete policy allows youth and cadet fencers to compete in the gender category they identify with and requires junior, senior, and veteran trans women's fencers to pass certain medical thresholds in order to compete in the women's category (USA Fencing Policy). The American fencing community's response has thankfully been somewhat positive. USA Fencing Board Chair and USFCA Maitre d'Epee Damien Lehfeldt defends the policy, arguing that "[g]iving athletes a sense of belonging and a will to live is more powerful than medals and competitive glory" and "[i]n Fencing, there is no data to support" whether trans women have inherent advantages over cisgender women (On Trans Inclusion in Fencing). Lehfeldt offers a notable anecdote to demonstrate the positive impact that gender inclusivity has on fencers. For example, one athlete who Lehfeldt anonymously refers to as Giraldo went through the following progression:

> When Giraldo graduated and went off to college, I began to hear stories about him acting out, not playing nice with teammates, and drinking to excess. 'You're talking about *Giraldo?'* I would ask … Around sophomore year, Giraldo posted on Instagram that she was no longer Giraldo. She was now calling herself "Rhonda" and identified as a woman. Rhonda came home from school with newfound confidence, pep in her step, and the timidity I once associated her with was gone. She wasn't a boy afraid of his own shadow anymore, but a confident, strong young woman who suddenly was who she was always meant to be. She was her authentic self.

In short, being able to present as their authentic selves leads fencers to be happier, kinder people. This supports data cited that suggests “transgender athletes are ‘less likely to report depression or suicidal thoughts than heterosexual and cisgender adolescents’” (On Trans Inclusion in Fencing). Despite dozens of state legislatures considering laws that would isolate and harm trans athletes, USA Fencing has taken the route of advocating the athlete’s whole health as the primary objective.

In addition to the numerous personalities outside of fencing negatively reporting on trans fencer success and commenting on USAF’s policy, conservative personalities in fencing echo transphobic causes. In addition to the Fair Fencing Organization and their Board sympathizers Andrey Geva and Maria Panyi, the blog *Fencing Parents*, edited by Donna Meyer, has posted several critiques of USA Fencing’s trans policy. Meyer repeatedly identifies herself as a “fencing mom” with “incredible insight into sports as a great way to stand out in an application for admission to an academically elite college” (About X Factor Admissions). Meyer’s primary readers are intended to be fencing parents who similarly view fencing’s telos as an avenue into higher education. This context foregrounds Meyer’s May 2023 critique of USA Fencing’s transgender policy as disadvantageous to female cadet women’s fencers. In short, Meyer argues that, because trans girls can compete in cadet events without medically transitioning, cisgender girls are at a disadvantage (USA Fencing’s Transgender Policy Disadvantages Girls in Cadet Events). Meyer writes “The transgender policy for cadet women’s events means that a 16- year- old boy with post-pubescent male physiology who identifies as a transgender woman can compete unrestricted against girls in cadet events.” The language of calling a trans woman a “boy … who identifies as a transgender woman” is transphobic, plainly– trans women are women, and trans girls are girls, not boys. Additionally, USAF’s policy requires that all fencers competing in junior and senior events adhere to medical transitioning rules. Gaffes withstanding, Meyer continues to argue “USA Fencing is plagued with issues of sexual harassment of women

and sexual abuse of female youth fencers, and now it chooses to dictate to teenage girls that they must take a backseat to USA Fencing's declared priority of inclusion for transgender women in cadet women's events. Does USA Fencing really value the women in the community?" The equivocation of LGBTQIA+ rights and sexual misconduct is a queerphobic trope as old as time. The central thrust of Meyer's post that I want to underscore is the alienating us-versus-them language she uses to describe the situation. She says "While USA Fencing sought advice from groups that promote inclusivity for LGBTQ+ groups,"-- that is, medical professionals at Mt. Sinai– "it appears that USA Fencing did not bother to consult the stakeholders (its own members!) who would be most impacted by the transgender policies." Who are queer folks and allies in fencing if not the stakeholders who elect the Board? The language of calling trans girls boys and insinuating that queer people in fencing have a less-valuable voice in the community than the parents to whom Meyer panders[2] is symptomatic of transphobic language that results in violence and disenfranchisement of queer people. USA Fencing must continue to be steadfast in its repudiation of transphobic vitriol, which they have been effectively doing for several years now.

I read Meyer's post on cadet events as a veiled attempt to impose a social critique onto fencing. That said, her post about biometric differences in performance between male and female athletes is particularly interesting. She writes "Medical Evidence Points to an Insurmountable Advantage in Sports for Biological Males." She then provides several studies from researchers at Duke University comparing male and female performance in track and field events. (The first article that Meyer cites is currently inaccessible online, as it is being revised.) Meyer extrapolates from two studies comparing cisgender women and cisgender men that there is a disparity between cisgender women and transgender women, failing to account for the lack of comparative data between cis and trans women. There is no data available comparing trans women on puberty blockers to cisgender women either, so Meyer uses data comparing

[2]Meyer also assumes there is a mutual exclusivity between transgender fencers and families of fencers.

cisgender women and men to promote changes to cadet women's epee eligibility. This feels ill-advised and intellectually dishonest. Meyer's own source ends by saying "Whether the male athletic advantage remaining after [gender affirming hormone therapy] is unfair is a question that is currently being debated by scholars, sport governing bodies, and legislators." That is, the findings are not yet conclusive, yet Meyer uses the study to make a conclusive argument about fairness. Moreover, Meyer uses running speed as the primary metric to compare cisgender male and female performance, despite there being no comparative data between cisgender and transgender women involved, or limited involvement of running in the sport of fencing.

2025 Anti-transgender policy and responses

Since I've begun writing this thesis in May 2024, there has been a significant shift in American policy and climate surrounding transgender individuals. Over a dozen anti-trans bills have been passed into law in states across the country (What anti-trans bills passed in 2025?), and President Trump has signed multiple memoranda and executive orders targeting transgender individuals. On January 20, 2025 the Trump Administration issued the executive order so-called "DEFENDING WOMEN FROM GENDER IDEOLOGY EXTREMISM AND RESTORING BIOLOGICAL TRUTH TO THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT." The order attempts to make it US policy that only male and female sexes exist (and derides the science of intersex people and gender as mere "gender ideology"), orders Homeland Security to issue passports with applicants' assigned gender at birth, and ensures that "grant conditions and grantee preferences and ensure grant funds do not promote gender ideology." This executive order and the transphobia that girds the Trump Administration has had immediate ripples in the sporting world. It has evidently been applied retroactively, since the University of Pennsylvania has had $175 million in funding rescinded by the federal government because of Lia Thomas' collegiate swimming career, which ended in 2022 and during which she abided by the NCAA and Ivy League policies in place at that time (Associated Press News). Additionally, in an act of

preemptive capitulation to the executive order, the NCAA's Board of Governors has banned transgender athletes from participating in women's competition ("NCAA announces transgender student-athlete participation policy change").

Neither the executive order nor the NCAA's change in policy directly impact USA Fencing; nonetheless, actors sympathetic to the Trump Administration's cause have argued otherwise. In December 2024, the Board of USA Fencing considered a motion by Maria Panyi to create an "ALL-female" transgender task force to address "Concerns from our members [which] highlight potential disadvantages for cisgender female athletes in areas such as college recruiting and national team selections" (December Special Board Meeting Minutes). This motion failed, as did a motion by Andrey Geva to remove an LGBT safety map from a list of criteria allowing USA Fencing flexibility in national event selection sites. In both December 2024 and February 2025 Geva motioned to dissolve USAF's Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging Office.

Geva is a former officer of the Fair Fencing Organization (though at the time of writing, they've deleted his bio on their site). While the FFO's mission statement calls the group "a national platform of open communication," it has instead positioned itself as a right-wing voice in fencing. Since December, the FFO has written three open letters (one to the membership[3] and two to the Board) and announced fundraising for a class action lawsuit against USA Fencing. In the first letter to the Board, the FFO decries the consideration of LGBTQ+ membership safety in national event selection sites and calls transgender inclusion "a political cult." In the second letter to the Board, the FFO explicitly uses the Trump Administration's policies as an impetus for USA Fencing to "Eliminate all DEI positions and DEIB policies," [and] "Prohibit[ing] transgender athletes [from] competing in women's category." The letter closes by threatening USA Fencing with a lawsuit, ominously stating "Now we would like to know if you will defy the Administration's

[3] The letter to the membership argues "Supporting DEIB and transgender is a religion in the mind of our USFA leadership that is imposed on every member without any discussion or study."

executive orders." On February 12, they announced fundraising for a suit, writing that "After years of efforts to bring changes from within, we came into a conclusion [sic] that this organization can only be transformed by external force."

For all the efforts of the Fair Fencing Organization and the Board members who sympathize with them, there are many constituents in American fencing who uphold the values of diversity, equity and inclusion. At the beginning of the February 2025 Board meeting, Kat Holmes OLY spoke on behalf of the USA Fencing Athlete Commission (AC). The AC "would like to emphasize the FFO does not speak for, nor represent, USA Fencing's membership, but rather an unspecified subsection," and "is united in the belief that USA Fencing should neither comply with, nor is obliged to comply with, the executive order signed by the Trump administration regarding DEIB positions in institutions" nor the order regarding trans athletes. As Holmes explains,

> USA Fencing is neither a federally funded organization, nor an educational institution. As such, it has autonomy over the rules and standards that apply to its members. Furthermore, there is a paucity of literature examining the impact of gender reassignment, either hormonally or surgically, on performance in the sport of fencing. Until the time at which peer-reviewed scientific evidence is published on this matter or USA Fencing is required to comply with rule or regulation set forth by the USOPC or the FIE, the Athlete Council will remain firm on this stance. The Athlete Council represents a body of members that come from various walks of life, that have benefited from such efforts to promote their belonging and advancement in the sport. To stop said efforts is to majorly affect the next generation of fencers.

The AC argues that since USA Fencing receives no federal funding, executive orders dictating changes for federal grantees do not apply. Additionally, the Council sees a dearth of research suggesting transgender athletes have an unfair advantage and that more research is needed.[4] [5]

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[4] The Athlete Council includes at least three medical students as well as others with research backgrounds.

[5] This paper is finalized right as we see new instances of transphobia in American fencing. In short, at the 2025 Cherry Blossom ROC, cisgender fencer Stephanie Turner refused to fence transgender fencer Red Sullivan in the women's foil event. Turner turned to conservative media to amplify her story, Red has been

Literature Review

Tidmas et al. “The Participation of Trans Women in Competitive Fencing and Implications on Fairness: A Physiological Perspective Narrative Review”

Tidmas et al. analyzes the lunge action to extrapolate physiological differences between cisgender men and women. Tidmas et al. identifies testosterone as the chief source of difference in performance because of larger and longer skeleton bones, height, and greater muscle mass. Using jump height and leg power parameters, the authors find that cis male fencers “move faster, attack opponents more frequently, and significantly differ in work- to- rest ratio compared to similarly matched cis female fencers.” However, age also impacts leg power performance, with fencers 20+ years old having higher values for numerous parameters than 14-17 and 18-20 year olds. Analyzing testosterone suppression and general (non-fencing-specific) sporting performance, Tidmas et al. finds that trans women’s maintained bone density aids in preventing injury and in recovery and that muscle memory can help trans women retain muscle mass through transition.

Tidmas et al. suggests that cis females are at a disadvantage in contrast with cis males in fencing using measurements of the lunge action. They also suggest that cis females would be at a disadvantage contrasted with trans females because of effects of hormone replacement therapy transgender women often experience. However, there is no analysis done of transgender females as they compare to cisgender females in fencing. Additionally, it is found that “Hyperandrogenism”-- increased testosterone levels– “has been shown to be common in elite cis female athletes [**84**,**85**,**86**]; however, it is commonly undiagnosed [**87**].” This suggests that testosterone as an indicator of high performance is found in cisgender women and that the

unfairly subjected to transphobic vitriol online, and Ted Cruz has written a letter to USA Fencing scrutinizing its policies.

issue is not biological binarism but rather the presence of testosterone that can be found in anybody.

Tidmas et al. write that “No relevant research was found observing the effect of transition medical treatments taken prior to puberty” and that “The authors acknowledge there is currently no research investigating elite trained transgender athletes’ participation in fencing.” Therefore, while Tidmas does valuable work in empirically comparing cis men and women in lunge performance, more research needs to be done to effectively hypothesize about the fairness of including trans women in fencing competitions. Additionally, Tidmas et al. argues “policy updates should also consider other aspects not covered within this review, such as the social or political implications of policy changes to ensure fairness, safety, and inclusivity.” This is a double-bind that, if approached correctly, can promote the well-being of both transgender people and the sport of fencing. As Tidmas et al. writes, fencing training environments are already often mixed, and “If policies enforce sex segregation throughout all levels of the sport, then local fencing clubs may not survive, as it is a small niche sport [**30**].”

“How does hormone transition in transgender women change body composition, muscle strength and haemoglobin? Systematic review with a focus on the implications for sport participation”

Harper et al. review literature on the effects of long-term testosterone suppression and their impact on the metrics of lean body mass, muscular area, muscular strength and hemoglobin blood levels. In all metrics, transgender women saw decreases. Hemoglobin levels in transgender women match those of cisgender women after four months of HRT, and after twelve months, strength, lean body mass and muscle area also occur. While HRT decreases these levels, in the first 3 years of hormone therapy, “findings suggest that strength may well be preserved” (1).

There are two kinds of differences in Harper et al.'s review that are of interest. First, they find "prospective studies investigating the changes in athletic performance in transgender athletes after hormonal transition. In non-athletic transgender populations, studies are commonly focused on clinical outcomes, such as bone health" (1). That is, at the time of writing, Harper et al. find that non-athletic populations are being studied to learn about athletic populations because of a lack of transgender athletes to study. In short, "the performance-related differences between transwomen who have received gender affirming hormone treatment (GAHT) and cisgender women are less clear" (1).

The second difference is that among all studies surveyed, Hormone Replacement Therapy / Gender Affirming Hormone Therapy treatments varied widely. Different anti-androgens (testosterone-suppressing medicines) were used between studies, and different kinds of estrogen were used, too. Furthermore, out of the 24 studies reviewed, five included trans femmes with post-HRT testosterone levels higher than cisgender women while 19 did not. Of the five that did, four used adolescent transfemales as subjects and one of these studies didn't even use estrogen. Much like the other studies and literature reviews, Harper et al. find "the effects of [Gender Affirming Hormone Therapy] on these parameters, or indeed athletic performance in transgender people who engage in training in competition, remain unknown" and a "sparse data risk" exists on account of the low number of transgender people to be studied (7, 8).

"Transwoman Elite Athletes: Their Extra Percentage Relative to Female Physiology"

Alison Heather argues that transwomen athletes have a physiological advantage or cisgender women athletes on the basis of testosterone irreversibly changing the body from prenatal stages through adolescence. As Heather explains, testosterone facilitates greater muscle mass, bone density, cardiovascular efficiency, and even possibly hand-eye coordination in males than in females. Because these metrics are irreversible, Heather argues estrogen

cannot level the playing field between trans women and cisgender women training at a high level.

Interestingly, Heather examines brain networks among transgender women and cisgender women. While the author admits “there is little understanding about changes in brain structure and function in transgender individuals,” Heather also says that a meta-analysis shows neither trans women nor trans men having changes in verbal memory, verbal reasoning, verbal working memory, computation, or motor coordination.

In short, because testosterone motivates differences in metrics that impact performance between cisgender males and cisgender females, Heather calls for the reconsideration of including trans women in the “elite female division” until more research emerges.

IOC Framework on Fairness, Inclusion and Non-Discrimination on the Basis of Gender Identity and Sex Variations

Arguably, the most impactful policy change that Tidmas et al. allude to is the International Olympic Committee (IOC) Framework on Fairness, Inclusion and Non-Discrimination on the Basis of Gender Identity and Sex Variations. The IOC aims to maintain “the credibility of competitive sport” while actively including everyone (1). In addition to outlining spheres in which trans athletes should be included in sports federations’ policies (i.e. in training environments, eligibility criteria, and facilities), the IOC also argues that these policies “should be done in consultation with a cross-section of affected athletes” (3).

From the reader’s perspective, the IOC aims to use an evidence-based approach to create guidelines such that both inclusion and fairness are accounted for. This slants toward inclusion rather than exclusion of gender diverse athletes, given that any exclusionary policies have to be drawn from peer-reviewed research with robust standards. Particularly, such research would have to be “based on data collected from a demographic group that is consistent in gender and athletic engagement with the group that the eligibility criteria aim to

regulate" and "demonstrates that such disproportionate competitive advantage and/or unpreventable risk exists for the specific sport, discipline and event that the eligibility criteria aim to regulate" (4). That is, any research being cited to bar transgender athletes from a sport and/or any specific events therein would have to have collected data on transgender athletes within that sport. This is incredibly significant since, as of the time of writing, no such data exists on transgender fencers.

"Transwomen in elite sport: scientific and ethical considerations"

Taryn Knox, Lynley C Anderson and Alison Heather argue that the IOC's current required testosterone levels for trans women, 10 nmol/L maximum, is unfair to cisgender women because this level is higher than what typically occurs in cisgender women. They argue that the advantage trans women are afforded by male physiological advantage is "intolerable"; however, they also argue that, rather than be excluded from high-level sports altogether, instead a "nuanced approach satisfying both inclusion and fairness" should be adopted rather than the current male/female divisions.

"Implications of a Third Gender for Elite Sports"

Harper, et al. recognize that athletes cannot be adequately sorted into two male and female bins. Intersex and transgender people exist beyond that binary. After recapitulating the history of gender classifications in the Olympics and other sporting bodies, they argue the consensus among scientists is that the single most important factor in performance differences between male and female athletes is testosterone. They argue that including transgender or intersex women among cisgender female athletes is "reasonable" if and only if "all athletes competing have a chance to succeed." The authors also recognize that, due to myriad factors, not all athletes will have an equal chance of success within any given event.

Harper et al. explain “The initial fear that transgender women would dominate women’s sport has simply not materialised, in large part due to the effects of testosterone suppression. Transgender women are majorly underrepresented in elite level sport.” By the numbers, so the authors explain, there would have been 20-25 trans women and 2-3 medal winners in the Rio Olympics if trans women were proportionately represented– those numbers were instead 0 and 0. This paper was written in 2018– in Tokyo, 2020, there was a single trans woman competitor, and in Paris, 2024, none.

Discussion

We don’t yet have nearly enough research and data to support concerns about transgender women in fencing. If we refute the science referenced in the IOC, NCAA (pre-Trump Administration) and USA Fencing’s decisions to allow trans women to compete, instead fomenting bans, we prevent ourselves from ever being able to accrue the information needed to make data-based decisions about fairness in the sport. Currently, there is no trend of transgender women routinely medaling at national events, as opposed to the domination transphobes contend is inevitable when trans women compete. If we see a rise in transgender participation in fencing coinciding with anomalous results, then we could make such decisions. In fact, if we were to grow that population in our sport, then the third gender category that some have proposed would be feasible at the national and regional levels.

Fencing is an Open Skill Sport

Having participated in five Olympic games as an athlete and numerous Olympics and World Championships as a coach, Michael Marx is one of the most prolific American fencers and coaches of all time. In a 2016 interview at his local library, Marx says “For me, I think there are several areas where you can be good. In fencing, it's not just a sport. I mean, if you're physically great, it's good. It's great if you're a good athlete and stuff. But it's a learned sport. If

you work hard and you learn properly, you can be good at fencing. In fact, virtually everyone I know that's worked hard and—some of those worst athletes can be great fencers because they do the work" (Kline and Kline, "Michael Marx / Olympic Fencing"). In conversation, Michael frequently refers to fencing as an open skill sport, where winning is predicated on tactics and other variables beside being faster or stronger. For Marx, while athleticism can be a path to success in fencing, any fencer regardless of athleticism can achieve success by doing hard work. I once asked Michael what the ideal physical training regimen was, and by extension, what the best body type for fencing is. He told me that the best regimen is that which makes the fencer comfortable in their body.

American Fencing Masters COO and co-founder Igor Chirashnya offers a similar interpretation of the skills needed in fencing, explaining in his blog that "Fencing, often hailed as a physical manifestation of mental agility and strategic thinking, provides an exceptional platform for girls and women to excel. Unlike some sports where physical attributes may confer advantages or act as barriers to progress, fencing places a premium on mental acuity and tactical finesse, offering equality to all women in the sport" (Celebrating Women's Impact in Fencing"). I channel Marx and Chirashnya to explain that there is long-standing sentiment that technical and tactical skill, rather than raw physicality, is a means of success in fencing.

How does this line of thinking juxtapose with critiques of USA Fencing's Transgender and Non-binary policy? I don't think many people who rail against trans participation in sports actually care about fairness. If the chief complaint against trans women fencing is biological advantage, then we would need to hear complaints against intersex women and cisgender women who are stronger and taller than average. Tidmas et al. estimates that 1 in 500-600 female athletes have XY chromosomes and that over 400 cis female Olympians in five Olympic games had Y chromosomes ("The Participation of Trans Women in Competitive Fencing and Implications on Fairness"). Additionally, in fencing we see cisgender women who are taller than the national and global averages (5'3" and 5'4") succeed frequently. Oddly enough, I don't see

posts from Fencing Parents, the Fair Fencing Organization, or USA Fencing Board candidate platforms advocating for the introduction of height and weight classes to ensure that shorter-than-average women's fencers succeed.

How should coaches support queer athletes?

The topic of transgender inclusion elicits different, often passionate opinions. The fencing community is composed of people occupying many roles, often simultaneously. Parents such as Meyer and lawyers such as Fair Fencing Organization president Jason Liu[6] claim to represent parents and officials. What role do coaches play here? As far as I see it, fencing coaches have several obligations, whether we coach recreational youth classes or Olympic champions. We need to effectively teach the sport of fencing, often support a business, and we also need to advocate for our athletes and foster growth of the sport. USFCA Maestra Julie Seal argues that a good coach "Helps athletes identify the 'why' in everything they do" and "Is a ***protector***. Athletes are giving everything. Coaches are their first and best advocates. Coaches are teammates. When athletes win or lose, so does the coach" (italicized bolding is my own) ("What Makes a Fencing Master"). In short, coaches facilitate the growth, success and health of their athletes.

So, for me, coaches have no option but to support queer athletes when we're fortunate enough to have that opportunity. I've written about the relationship between coaching and

[6] I emailed Mr. Liu asking for an FFO stance on transgender participation in fencing in 2024. Mr. Liu wrote to me: "We do not have a stance on including transgender athletes and we welcome them to join FFO if they agree to our mission statement.. We believe the transgender athletes should be able to participate in the sport like everyone else. They should be able to join any clubs they wish, get trained, and engage in the sport. We do have a belief however in ensuring the fairness of the tournament and protecting women's rights in the game. Trans-female athletes (biological male at birth) have undeniable physical advantages over the female athletes (biological female at birth), especially after puberty. It would be unfair and even unsafe to the rest of female athletes if they compete in women's category. We think USFA's transgender policy needs to be revisited. … It is not accurate that FFO only supports trans athletes in fencing recreationally. We support and encourage trans athletes compete in the category that matches their gender at birth or they are welcome to attend any competitions with mixed category. We just do not support trans women athletes compete in the women category."

queerness before, and several inclusivity-related principles guide my coaching philosophy– trust, acceptance and flexibility (“Fencing Coach adjusts to genderqueer life in Missouri”). Namely, a healthy coach-athlete relationship needs to be established on trust, acceptance, and flexibility. Athletes must be able to trust that their coach will support them whether their name, pronouns, body, or the event they compete in changes. For this trust to be earned, a coach needs a track record of demonstrating acceptance of any athlete who comes through their club’s doors– or any athlete who comes out to us along the path that is a fencing career. My transition into nonbinary identity coincided with the opening of St. Louis Fencing Club in 2022, where I was appointed head coach. My previous club had dissolved, and when designing the mission of the new club, my employer and I prioritized inviting in as much of the St. Louis community as we could. When designing the interior of our space in downtown St. Louis, next door to the Major League Soccer Stadium of St. Louis FC, we decided to hang a large pride flag on the wall among the national flags of our fencers’ families. This involved vulnerability and openness with our customers; being a queer head coach in a systematically homophobic state was scary. When STLFC opened, I therefore wrote “As queer folk know, coming out isn’t something we do once. We do it over and over again, staking faith — or bravery in the absence of faith — in the individuals we choose to invite into our lives with more clarity. We then hope for acceptance, and when the world only meets us halfway (or not at all) we act in flexibility too, whether in discreet solidarity or various shades of repression. And when things go well, we’re in communion with our neighbors” (“Fencing Coach adjusts to genderqueer life in Missouri”). This vulnerability paid off. We had several queer families with athletes of all ages participating, and I recall a queer couple taking selfies with our flag in their gear at the end of an introductory class. The fencing space is the most sacrosanct safe space that members of the LGBTQIA+ community and our allies can create in the sport, a place where trust, flexibility and acceptance are programmed into what we do.

There are innumerable reasons to foster inclusivity in the fencing club/team environment. Mathematically speaking, opening the door for a wider client base will increase the opportunity to support a business– for every bigot turned away by a pride flag on the wall, folks from a beautiful array of walks of life will be encouraged to come in. In addition to profit, an increased clientele will fulfill the strategic goal of fostering love of the sport. This corresponds with the role of the coach as a supportive, protective educator, too. I have several suggestions that coaches can implement in their fencing spaces and in the wider community. In the club, you can signal that queer athletes and their families will be safe by including something as small as a pride flag sticker on the entry way door or window, or even a sign as vague as saying 'All are welcome here.' If your club boosts a multi-cultural ethos by hanging flags from myriad countries on the walls, consider including a pride flag like we did at St. Louis Fencing Club. If you have the ability, label restrooms as gender neutral. In addition to creating a visually welcoming space, clubs can engage with local LGBTQIA+ community groups to collaborate on events that invite community members into your business. These events might be queer-inclusive date nights or open houses that include intro lessons, for example. The self-respecting fencing coach will do whatever it can to bring the sport to whomever we can so that others can love it as we do.[7]

I've come to believe in a model of education that involves care of the whole person. A liberal arts education sharpens the mind in all skill sets, allowing the student to specialize in the field of interest where their talents and passions best intersect. Such an education involves physical education, too, when the student wants to pursue it. As fencing coaches, we're cultivators of part of a whole education that continues indefinitely. If a principal or president of a university were to propose categorically excluding gender minorities from classroom learning, we would decry this as prejudiced nonsense. I contend that we ought to decry calls to exclude transgender fencers from our sport as similarly wrong. There is insufficient peer-reviewed data

[7]Before the ban on trans women, I would have also suggested coaches consult the NCAA Inclusion of Transgender-Student Athletes Handbook. Overall best practices included providing equal opportunities, valuing diversity and establishing policy (15-16).

comparing transgender fencers to cisgender fencers from which we can extrapolate any trends, and the current science that we do have has led the top sporting authorities in the world to include transgender athletes undergoing medical transition. When transphobes argue for the exclusion of transgender fencers, they prevent the possibility of any such data being collected, and are therefore being intellectually dishonest. Instead, as coaches we have a moral impetus calling to expand the sport by facilitating athletes of all shapes, sizes, and genders.

Competitive Solutions in the face of a trans ban

The state of politics and law in the United States is volatile and is ever-shifting, and given trends of courts and sporting authorities pre-emptively capitulating to the federal government (and the government continuing to push for exclusive legislation), it is likely the USOPC, and therefore the United States Fencing Association, is forced to implement a ban on transgender athlete participation. Policymakers in USA Fencing have long maintained that the ban would only come if necessary. At the December 14, 2024 Board meeting, USA Fencing's medical advisory group, Mt. Sinai and other legal consultants on trans and LGBTQIA+ rights reviewed current scientific studies and concluded that "As it stands, there is not enough new research to suggest implementing stronger restrictions on transgender athletes specifically" (25-26).

That said, several possible models for including transgender athletes have been proposed, perhaps anticipating politics forcing such a transgender ban regardless of science. The first option is requiring that trans women in cadet, junior, senior & veteran categories may compete so long as their testosterone levels have been less than 10 nmol/L for twelve months, proven by documentation from a medical professional or a prescription history (27). This model is consistent with research suggesting transgender women's testosterone levels can be lowered to a level consistent with cisgender women. However, President Trump and incumbent IOC President Kirsty Coventry have supported a blanket ban on all transgender women's

participation in sports regardless of hormone levels. Therefore, this model would likely not be viable given a transgender ban at the IOC or USOPC levels.

Another option considered by USA Fencing is a Mixed Event Category. The Mixed event would either replace the men's category or be offered in addition to the men's and women's events (December Board Meeting, 28). Cisgender women and transgender men who have not started taking testosterone would be eligible for the women's category; any athletes who identify as men would be eligible for the men's category, and all athletes regardless of gender identity or hormone treatment would be eligible for the mixed category (29). Should the mixed category exist in addition to the men's and women's, a ranking system and points list(s) would be created for the mixed category and have no bearing on national team selection (29).

In addition to the two models proposed at the December Board meeting, I raise a third possibility that likely would not survive a transgender ban but bears noting. Hypothetically, a ban could exclude transgender women from representing the United States in international sport but not exclude them from USOPC-funded sports altogether. For instance, the February 5 executive order "Keeping Men out of Women's Sports" directs the Secretaries of State and Homeland Security to utilize the Immigrant and Nationality Act "to review and adjust, as needed, policies permitting admission to the United States of males seeking to participate in women's sports" and work on "preventing such entry to the extent permitted by law." If this executive order is the legal fulcrum of the federal government's anti-trans athlete legislation, it could come to pass that trans women are able to continue competing in USA Fencing's women's tournaments (compliant with current USAF policy or the hypothetical 10 nmol/L policy) but remain ineligible to make a national team. In this scenario, we could treat transgender women in the same way we treat athletes competing in USA Fencing tournaments from other fencing federations– they can compete and earn points affecting their seeding, but the points would have no other bearing (i.e. in the same way that Canadian fencers frequently earn points at North American Cups but

cannot make US national teams). It is unlikely this model would survive a trans ban, but premature capitulation to the Trump Administration and IOC could include such a model.

Assuming an IOC or USOPC transgender ban is enforced by Kirsty Coventry or Donald Trump, I support the standalone Mixed Category as the best solution for complying with (hypothetical) law while including transgender athletes as much as possible– with a few conditions. In order to honor USAF's commitment to its members having "the opportunity to participate in [USAF] sanctioned events on a fair, inclusive and safe basis," the same competitive opportunities must exist for transgender athletes as for cisgender athletes. This includes guaranteed events at the local, regional and national levels. That is, NACs must have bona fide mixed category opportunities to foment a worthwhile points list and the rewards that come with it (whether this be a patch system like for regional points or an honorary national team). Scheduling NACs is already a complex challenge that experts tirelessly work through each season, so if the mixed category is scheduled at NACs less often than senior events (perhaps at the same frequency as veteran NACs or at all non-senior NACs), this can offset scheduling challenges. In order to afford competitive opportunities at the local and regional levels, mixed categories could be integrated with the men's events as a sort of hybrid between men's becoming mixed outright and always needing a third event at each tournament.

The reason I'm wary of relabeling men's event's as mixed (or men's/mixed, as some sports do) is it inadequately represents transgender women and nonbinary persons by lumping them in with men. Transgender women don't compete in women's events because they want a better chance at gold, despite what transphobic commentary may conspire. We compete in women's events because we *are* women and want to be seen as such in the way cisgender women want to be seen as women. It would therefore be an affront to USA Fencing's dedication to inclusivity and safety to lump transgender women in with men, which is what would culturally happen by calling a men's tournament a men's/mixed or mixed event contrasted with a cisgender-only women's event.

Conclusion

Scientific literature is either inconclusive on transgender athletes or suggests that further study is needed, as sport-specific research and research comparing transgender women and cisgender women is few and far between. This dearth in research motivates the USA Fencing Athlete Council and experts at Mt. Sinai to suggest that USA Fencing's current trans and non-binary policy remains in place to foster an inclusive and fair environment. Nonetheless, the Trump Administration and incumbent IOC President aim to ban transgender women from competing in Olympic sports entirely, and this poses a threat to the eligibility of transgender athletes in American fencing.

I therefore examine several possible competitive models for transgender women in fencing. First, transgender women may continue to compete in women's fencing under stricter blood testing. Transgender women could also continue to compete in women's fencing without being eligible to accrue points toward national team selection, which could preserve a semblance of inclusivity without violating FIE or IOC rules if a trans ban were to come into effect. Depending on the language of a ban from Presidents Trump or Coventry, it is possible that neither of these are possible for USA Fencing to implement.

A third solution that could evade trans bans is the creation of a mixed category, either in place of the men's category or existing as a category on its own. I argue that the creation of a third mixed category with its own points system and local, regional and national events in which transgender athletes and cisgender athletes are eligible[8] [9] offers transgender athletes access to

[8] In addition to being eligible for the mixed category, transgender men should be eligible for the men's event (and women's, if they haven't begun medical transition) and transgender women could be eligible for the men's category so that all demographics have access to larger events if they choose.
[9] I also suggest that national mixed events be offered at a similar frequency to Veteran NACs and/or at the NACs without senior events to avoid excess national tournament bloat, which is already a strain that national event organizers tirelessly navigate.

competitive fencing without socializing themselves as their assigned gender at birth without their consent.

Lastly, regardless of the path forward that USA Fencing takes, I offer several suggestions for coaches supporting queer athletes and their families in fencing spaces. It is morally imperative and in line with USA Fencing's strategic plan to grow the sport that coaches task themselves with protecting their athletes and taking visible steps to ensure to all community members that the fencing club is a safe space to engage in athletics as part of the formation of the whole, respected person.

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[11] The Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine is of incredible importance given that the NCAA has erased this page and any mention of its transgender eligibility policies before February 6, 2025.

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Appendix

Email conversation with Jason Liu:

Re: Fwd: [FairFencingOrg(FFO)] Contacts 5 - new submission
4 messages

Jason Liu <[redacted]> Mon, May 20, 2024 at 11:16 AM
To: [redacted]
Cc: "[redacted]" <[redacted]>, HE Zhang <[redacted]>, "[redacted]" <[redacted]>, "[redacted]" <[redacted]>

Hi Nova

We do not have a stance on including transgender athletes and we welcome them to join FFO if they agree to our mission statement.. We believe the transgender athletes should be able to participate in the sport like everyone else. They should be able to join any clubs they wish, get trained, and engage in the sport.

We do have a belief however in ensuring the fairness of the tournament and protecting women’s rights in the game. Trans-female athletes (biological male at birth) have undeniable physical advantages over the female athletes (biological female at birth), especially after puberty. It would be unfair and even unsafe to the rest of female athletes if they compete in women’s category. We think USFA’s transgender policy needs to be revisited.

Best regards,

Jason Liu
President & CEO Fairfencing.org
Email: jason.liu@fairfencing.org
Web: www.fairfencing.org

Nova **Gregory** [redacted] Wed, May 22, 2024 at 1:47 PM
on Liu <jason.liu@fairfencing.org>
Cc: "[redacted]
>

Thank you for your response, Jason. I'm working on an article for the USFCA's magazine Swordmaster, and I look to make that into a USFCA thesis thereafter. In the spirit of transparency, I don't share your opinion, but I appreciate your taking the time to respond as well as distinguishing your take on transgender inclusivity in fencing recreationally versus the competitive environment.

Regards,

Nova :t hidden]

Jason Liu <jason.liu@fairfencing.org> Fri, May 24, 2024 at 8:24 AM
To: [redacted]
Cc: "[redacted]
>

Hi Nova

It is not accurate that FFO only supports trans athletes in fencing recreationally. We support and encourage trans athletes compete in the category that matches their gender at birth or they are welcome to attend any competitions with mixed category. We just do not support trans women athletes compete in the women category.

Regards,

Jason Liu
President & CEO Fairfencing.org

Cell: (972) 897-9418 | Fax: (972) 346-6234
Email: jason.liu@fairfencing.org
Web: www.fairfencing.org

[Quoted text hidden]

Nova **Gregory** [redacted] Fri, May 24, 2024 at 8:35 AM
To: Jason Liu <jason.liu@fairfencing.org>

Thank you for your response, Jason— I didn't mean to misquote or misrepresent, so my apologies for that. I appreciate your clarification and taking the time to write.

Regards,

Nova ext hidden]